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The same old story, over and over again

Barely half a year ago there was war in Kosovo and the world witnessed the NATO bombings of Kosovo and Serbia. This was a war in which the defenceless population was driven from hearth and home, in which entire villages were burned to the ground and many people were killed, for the sole reason that they were 'different'. Now, not four months later, we are reporting on the next hotbed of the same calibre: East Timor. Angola is a similar case, but somehow barely seems to attract attention. These are repetitions of what we've witnessed in Bosnia and Rwanda only a few years ago. These are by no means the only conflicts of a similar nature that have arisen over the past few years, but they are the most well-known examples, and they are conflicts in which the UN and NATO played an important part.

Ed Hollants

One of the problems which arises when approaching these conflicts from a liberal point of view is whether or not one is in favour of military intervention by the international community. Recently discussions about and attention for conflicts mainly seem to develop in the wake of military intervention.
Complicating the issue is the fact that in all cases the international community passed over many an opportunity to prevent war. But other questions arise as well: what are the reasons to intervene, why did the international community not act sooner and what will come of intervention? In Rwanda there had been forewarnings for months that a well-organised campaign by the Hutu's to incite hatred against the Tutsi's was taking place. Various sources warned that this would inevitably have to come to a climax. Nevertheless very little was done to halt this process and the moment violence broke out the UN did a moonlight flit.
Regarding Bosnia the Dutch know only too well what kind of safety the UN offered the Bosnians: the United Nations utterly failed to stop or prevent ethnic cleansing. Many Bosnians would have had a much better chance of survival if they had fled to the hills, rather than seek shelter in the Dutch compound in Srebrenica. Since Bosnia, experts on the Balkan region, several NGO's (non- governmental organisations) and many Albanians warned time and time again that if no one intervened in the politics of Serbia regarding Kosovo, they risked the outburst of another conflict, including large-scale ethnic cleansing. Regardless, Kosovo was not involved in the negotiations with the Serb leadership after the Bosnian war which resulted in the Dayton Agreement. And now there is East Timor, where the population was given the vote on autonomy or independence in a referendum which was forced upon them. The outcome was set from the start, as well as the near certainty that subsequently there would be violent upsurges. The referendum was organised by the United Nations, based on an agreement with both Indonesia and Portugal. The East Timorese population as such had no say in the matter. But they and many authorities on Indonesia, as well as several NGO's, gave out warnings regarding the security situation. Although it is common knowledge that the Indonesian army is setting up, training and arming militias, that same army is made responsible for the safety of the Timorese population. The Timorese have stated on numerous occasions, and for everyone to hear, that right before or right after the referendum of 30 August it would come to violence, risking a repetition of the 1970s. Therefore, well before 30 August, more than 60,000 people had already fled to the hills as a result of intimidation and fear of events to come; shortly after 30 August many thousands followed.

Arguments against intervention

Besides all the familiar economic and strategic reasons for or against intervention there are

other issues at stake. The global political elite forms a tight network and professes much faith in one another's statements. Little store is set by facts from below, mainly highlighted by NGO's. NGO's and activists are seen as cumbersome gadflies, while fellow-ministers, diplomats and civil servants in their three-piece suits are automatically attributed with authority and trustworthiness, at dinner parties and in meetings. Assessments of security situations and conflicts are often written by pen-pushers in the civil service, based on information from their embassies in the countries concerned, where staff mainly mix and mingle with the elite. This explains the frequent and blatant discrepancies between reports from the Foreign Office and those from human rights groups.
In East Timor the UN made a capital blunder by relying on the diplomatic pressure which had been exerted on Indonesia and most probably reassuring words from the Indonesian government, while the people present in the field in East Timor arrived at a very different appraisal. The result was that the UN had no direct answer to the outbreak of the violence which was schematically carried out and had been planned and prepared for months. Their only response in the first week was the evacuation of UNAMET (the UN mission in East Timor), leaving the population to their own defences. The UN had no contingency plan at hand should pressure exerted at the level of diplomacy prove insufficient.

This applies to the Netherlands, but even more so to the one remaining superpower the United States. The US in particular have always let Indonesia do as it pleased. In the 1960s when more than a million Indonesians were butchered, as well as when it invaded East Timor. Behind the scenes the US have always given Indonesia their full support, as well as providing the country with arms.
Not surprisingly, the aforementioned economic interests do play an important part in this. The multinational Nike in large part depends on its Indonesian production, American mining companies are active in the area and Texaco, Chevron and Mobil produce oil here. These economic interests and the uncertainty as to what might happen should democratic forces in Indonesia gain too much momentum, will undoubtedly have resulted in pressure being exerted in international diplomatic circles to take things slowly. This will certainly have been one of the reasons for placing such trust in Indonesian assertions they would keep matters in hand. To assure stability in Indonesia the Western democracies will, for the time being at least, continue to place their bets on the Indonesian army, making any heavy criticism of that same army virtually impossible. Human rights and support for democratic forces will, as usual, only play a minor role, or they may even fall victim to these ulterior interests. The US also faces a difficult choice when it comes to intervention, as the special unit of the Indonesian armed forces, Kopassus, was trained by the US. This unit is in large part responsible for the scorched earth tactics applied in East Timor. These are based on the so-called Phoenix operations first applied in Vietnam and later by the CIA-trained contra's in Nicaragua. The aim is to destroy all breeding grounds for resistance. The cadres of resistance movements, intellectuals, priests, anyone exerting any influence in society at all is viewed as a potential target. This is the kind of training which is most probably also given to the thousand Colombian soldiers who became operational in that country this past September to start a dirty war against the drug cartels and the guerrillas. In the mean time there is sufficient evidence that, apart from Australia, various intelligence agencies such as the American CIA were well aware of what was going on in East Timor regarding the training of militias by the army. The outbreak of violence was therefore undoubtedly expected. It is highly improbable that an intelligence service would not have been aware of what was all too clear to observers on the spot and various NGO's.

Arguments for intervention

Shocked by the events and their own failure, but certainly also urged by public opinion, the UN subsequently rapidly intervened. Although, it was Australia rather than the UN which intervened. European and American contributions to the peacekeeping force are conspicuously small. The US, who normally pride themselves in their self-proclaimed role as the number one power policing the world, are suddenly bringing up the rear. The leaders and peoples of many Asian and Third World countries are eyeing these events suspiciously. The term 'new imperialism' keeps cropping up whenever the UN interventions or the institution of a war crimes tribunal is mentioned. Many conflicts and economic disasters can be traced back to Western countries and the colonial heritage. Why is there no tribunal to deal with the colonial past or compensation for the slave trade? Thanks to Western support many dictators and police states remain firmly established. And should a country nevertheless become destabilised due to internal unrest which can no longer be contained by less blatant forms of repression, Western countries are quick to bring on human rights issues. Usually not with the aim to protect the people, but rather to ensure the peace and stability needed to safeguard their own economic interests. UN interventions, or rather, the readiness of many Western countries to give the UN the mandate to intervene, should therefore be seen as an attempt to steer Indonesia on to smoother waters. Which is not quite the same as consistent support for democratisation and observance of human rights. Furthermore, intervention did not take place until Indonesia gave the go-ahead, which may mean that as far as Indonesia was concerned, the job was done. In this light the intervention looses much of its significance. According to many reports coming out of East Timor at the moment, there is barely a house left standing.

So should we intervene?

Should one therefore oppose military intervention on the grounds that it offers no real solution and is often prompted not by ethical, but by very different motives? In the case of Kosovo deciding the issue of whether or not to intervene proved very difficult. Regardless the blunders by the international community, the population was being displaced and killed on a large scale: how to stop this quickly and effectively? Certainly not by bombing, we said then. In effect, this was not helping anyone. On the contrary, civilian targets were bombed expressly with the aim to force the population to rise up against its leaders. This is a tried, but failing method, which was also used in Iraq. Another point in the case of Kosovo is that the Rambouillet Treaty was unpalatable for the Serbs and that options to renegotiate remained open. The case of East Timor is quite different. Indonesia has reconciled itself to an international intervention. But what if this had not been the case? Then the only option would have been to demand immediate action to stop the killing. The situation in East Timor was grave: every day hundreds of people perished and thousands were displaced. There was no alternative but to intervene. It is self-evident that Australia is not acting entirely selflessly; but the fact that Australia did decide to do something, should be applauded. Or rather, the fact that the killing has now been stopped. It turns out that special units of the Australian forces the Special Air Services Regiment (SAS) and the Royal Australian Navy's Clearance Diving Team (CDT) were already carrying out secret missions in and over East Timor at the beginning of this year. These missions were probably mostly intended to gather information and scout the terrain for a large- scale military operation. For example, CDT divers searched Dili harbour for mines. And reports from Indonesia last July regarding mysterious flights over East Timor and two helicopters landing near Viqueque, which were thought to be delivering arms to Falantil, were not just fabrications of an overreacting occupying force. They were largely correct. It seems that Australia realised that independence could no longer be avoided,

and therefore swiftly set out a new course. And they had every reason to. The Sea of Timor between Australia and East Timor (and in East Timorese waters) harbours immense oil and gas reserves. And furthermore, contrary to the stance taken by various governments, public opinion was strongly opposed to the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. And within the Australian armed forces there has always been a strong current of feeling in favour of coming to the aid of the East Timorese people. This stems from Australia's past. In the Second World War the East Timorese protected and sheltered groups of Australian soldiers from the Japanese, thus saving many Australians' lives. But at the same time 60,000 Timorese lost theirs due to reprisals by the Japanese.

Then what?

It is always helpful to study how a conflict started and what the underlying interests are, as well as the motives to intervene. But apart from that, one has to take the current situation into account. To protect their economic and strategic interests, many countries choose not to intervene when human rights are first violated. But those same interests also play a part when it comes to deciding on intervention. Apart from that, there is a yawning gap between the people in the field and the administrators and international diplomacy. NGO's in countries in conflict, but also NGO's outside these countries, often have a much better grasp of the situation than the people making the decisions. They listen to the rank and file, the people and their needs; their voice is hardly ever heard.

The discussion should focus on whether military intervention could have been avoided. Every effort should be made to prevent future conflicts. And then there is the issue of what military intervention should be followed by. Somalia was a fiasco, Bosnia and Kosovo are hornets' nests and ethnically segregated in practice, although the aim was to prevent this from happening. With East Timor the UN are bringing the next hornets' nest about their ears. The debate must be broadened quickly, otherwise in future the issues of the day may decide about military intervention, and the UN and human rights will be used as political weapons in the hands of countries defending their own ulterior interests.

It is more than necessary that NGO's from different parts of the world join together. The International Federation of East Timor - Observer Project (IFET-OP), in which the author took part, set a good example. In spite of many organisational problems, over 120 people from more than 20 different countries split up in 16 teams still managed to carry out their given tasks. It would not be a bad idea to establish more of such projects. This is the way the Peace Brigades have been operating for a long time in conflict areas. It would be worth trying to set up an organisation like Amnesty, but which does not shun politics. If one concludes that decisions whether or not to intervene in human rights violations mainly hinge on economic and strategic assessments, one should focus more on these aspects rather than on the political lobby. Companies can be made to pay heed. The Brent Spar more than proved this in the case of Shell. But, forced by public opinion, various companies have also withdrawn from Burma. Furthermore, across all strata of society people disapprove of arms deals, especially when weapons are sold to countries notorious for the violation of human rights. This is an area where campaigning may prove successful. It still remains valid to oppose military intervention on principle, because if one looks past the immediate future, the arguments for solving conflicts in different ways are plentiful. In all fairness, one cannot accuse people adhering to this point of view of complicity in mass murders. Speaking for myself, I can only say that I recognise that in some cases military intervention may be unavoidable, but I feel that it is an option in which in the end everyone loses out.